

# Ron Paul staffers indicted, tied to Kent Sorenson payoff



Jason Noble, jnoble2@dmreg.com 3:31 p.m. CDT August 5, 2015



(Photo: Register file photo)

The other shoe has finally dropped in the long-running case concerning criminal activity by former Iowa state Sen. Kent Sorenson during the 2012 Iowa caucuses campaign.

The Department of Justice on Wednesday announced a host of criminal charges against three staffers from Ron Paul's 2012 presidential campaign.

Jesse R. Benton, John M. Tate and Dimitrios N. Kesari were indicted on numerous charges stemming from an alleged conspiracy to woo Sorenson, R-Milo, away from rival candidate Michele Bachmann's presidential campaign with \$73,000 in illicit payments and then hide those payments from public disclosure.

"Federal campaign finance laws are intended to ensure the integrity and transparency of the federal election process," Assistant Attorney General Leslie Caldwell said in a statement announcing the charges (<http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/three-members-2012-presidential-campaign-staff-charged-concealing-payments-made-state-senator>). "When political operatives make under-the-table payments to buy an elected official's political support, it undermines public confidence in our entire political system."

Although the indictment is related to incidents that happened almost four years ago, the case could have repercussions on the 2016 presidential race: Benton and Tate are close confidants of current Republican presidential candidate Rand Paul, and since April have been running a super PAC supporting the Kentucky senator and son of Ron Paul.

The charges come almost a year after Sorenson pleaded guilty to concealing payments he received and obstructing an investigation into the incident. He has not yet been sentenced in that case, and it's widely assumed that he is cooperating with a wider investigation.



DES MOINES REGISTER

Timeline of the Kent Sorenson case

(<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2015/08/05/timeline-kent-sorenson-case/31178163/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>)

According to the federal indictment, Benton, Tate and Kesari conspired to conceal \$73,000 paid to Sorenson by routing payments first through a film production company and then through a company owned by Sorenson.

The subterfuge was necessary because Sorenson was prevented by state Senate rules from receiving payment for work done on a presidential campaign.

An attorney for Benton on said his client has cooperated with the Justice Department and accused prosecutors of advancing the case to damage Rand Paul's political ambitions.

"That this indictment is now suddenly announced on the eve of the first Republican presidential debate strongly supports our belief that this is a politically motivated prosecution designed to serve a political agenda, not to achieve justice," attorney Roscoe C. Howard, Jr. said in a statement provided to the Des Moines Register. "Mr. Benton is eager to get before an impartial judge and jury who will quickly recognize this for what he believes it is: Character assassination for political gain."

In an interview with the Washington, D.C., publication National Journal on Wednesday, Kesari declined to comment (<http://www.nationaljournal.com/2016-elections/rand-paul-allies-indicted-on-conspiracy-charges-from-ron-paul-s-2012-campaign-20150805>), saying there was a "gag order" on the case.

Sorenson's involvement with the Bachmann and Paul campaigns and the outlines of the effort to pay him under the table have been known for years, since being revealed in a report by an Iowa Senate-appointed special investigator.

But the 20-page indictment announced on Wednesday goes into explicit detail on how the arrangement worked. According to the indictment (<http://www.justice.gov/opa/file/643166/download>):

•Benton contacted Sorenson in October 2011, offering to pay him to “defect” from the Bachmann campaign and support Ron Paul instead. Kesari, the national deputy campaign manager, contacted Sorenson repeatedly in the weeks that followed, pressing for his endorsement.

Sorenson at the time was seen as an influential leader among Iowa social conservatives and capable of swinging a substantial bloc of votes in the GOP caucuses.

•In late December, Sorenson apparently agreed to switch his allegiance, and on Dec. 26, Kesari presented him with a \$25,000 check. On Dec. 28, after appearing at a Bachmann event in the afternoon, Sorenson dramatically threw his endorsement to Paul at a rally that evening.

•Sorenson never cashed the check. Instead, according to the indictment, the Paul staffers worked out an arrangement by which Sorenson would be paid through wire transfers. Sorenson and the campaign agreed he would be paid the initial \$25,000, plus \$8,000 a month for the first six months of 2012.

•In late January, the first such wire transfer went through: Sorenson used his company Grassroots Strategy to bill an unidentified film production company, which in turn billed the campaign. The campaign paid the film company, which then routed the money to Grassroots Strategy and, ultimately, Sorenson.

•In Federal Election Committee reports, the campaign identified these line items as “audio/visual expenses,” effectively concealing the payments to Sorenson.

That arrangement continued monthly until June 2012. In June, Tate emailed Kesari about the most recent payment, writing, “What is this? What is it for, who is it? Why do we keep paying them? The last payment was supposedly the last.”

Kesari replied, “This the last payment for kent Sorenson [sic]. The deal jesse agreed to with kent.” In a subsequent message, he added, “Is [sic] was for 6 months.”

The indictment goes on to allege that Kesari traveled to Sorenson’s home in September 2013 to request that Sorenson return that initial \$25,000 check (after first asking Sorenson to prove he was not wearing a recording device).

In the summer of 2014, the indictment alleges that Benton and Tate made false statements to the FBI in the matter.

Benton, Tate and Kesari are charged with conspiracy, causing false records to obstruct a contemplated investigation, causing the submission of false campaign expenditure reports to the Federal Election Commission and engaging in a scheme to make false statements to the FEC.

Benton is additionally charged with making false statements to the FBI. Kesari is also charged with obstruction of justice.

According to the indictment, the payments were hidden not only from the FEC, the FBI and the public but also from Ron Paul himself.

Kesari appeared in U.S. District Court in Iowa on Wednesday, according to a Department of Justice news release. Benton and Tate are scheduled to appear on Sept. 3.

A spokesman for the Department of Justice on Wednesday declined to provide additional details on the case beyond what was included in the press release announcing the indictment.

#### **Latest on Kent Sorenson**

Former Iowa state Sen. Kent Sorenson pleaded guilty last summer for his role in accepting under-the-table payments from U.S. Rep. Ron Paul’s 2012 presidential campaign, and now faces up to 25 years in prison.

He has not yet been sentenced, however, prompting wide speculation that he is cooperating with authorities in an ongoing investigation.

A spokesman for the Department of Justice on Wednesday declined to comment on Sorenson’s role in the investigation that led to indictments of former Paul staffers Jesse Benton, John Tate and Dimitrios Kesari. Court documents for Sorenson’s case indicate no changes in his status in light of the indictment unsealed on Wednesday.

Sorenson has been in the news repeatedly since pleading guilty last August. Twice, he failed court-mandated drug tests, and just last month he was arrested on a charge of domestic abuse in an incident involving his wife.

Court documents show the judge in his federal case responded to the domestic abuse arrest by ordering Sorenson to undergo medical care and to leave the home he shares with his wife and move in with his mother.



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